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ABSTRACT

Noting that students' homework provides an opportunity for families and schools to work together to help students be successful in school, this booklet, designed for parents, offers suggestions for ways parents can use homework to become more involved with their child's education. The booklet discusses reasons for assigning homework, including helping students learn better and faster, informing children of their school's high expectations, and helping students develop self-discipline and responsibility. The bulk of the booklet discusses ways parents can support their child's homework: (1) make homework a priority; (2) show interest; (3) know the teacher's homework policy; (4) help your child set aside studying time; (5) work with your child to pick a study spot; (6) eliminate distractions; (7) help your child keep track of each day's assignments; (8) check your child's finished homework; (9) help your child develop a study plan; (10) teach your child to ask questions while studying; (11) make sure your child understands assignments; (12) help your child with time management; (13) learn how your child learns; (14) help your child visualize success; (15) emphasize the importance of hard work; (16) help your child study for tests; (17) give honest praise; (18) help your child work through confusion; and (19) remember whose homework it is. Finally, the booklet discusses what parents can do if their child is having problems, when they no longer understand their child's homework, and when homework involves a computer and the parents do not own one. (Contains 23 references.) (KB)

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Helping Your Child With Homework

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How Parents Can Help Students With Homework

Educators and parents share one common goal — to help each child in our schools be successful. Homework provides one opportunity for families and schools to work together to achieve that goal.

It takes a team effort between students, parents, and educators for students to do their best in school. This booklet, designed for parents, offers suggestions on ways you can use homework to become more involved with your child's education. By putting these ideas into practice, you can ensure that your child achieves his[1] educational potential. Even more important, you'll be making sure your child lays the groundwork for a successful future.

Why Do Schools Assign Homework?

Studies show that the amount of time students spend learning a skill directly affects their ability to master it. Homework has many benefits. It can:

Help Students Learn Better and Faster

Homework gives students the opportunity to:

- ✓ Review and practice what they've learned.
- ✓ Get ready for the next day's class.
- ✓ Learn to use resources, such as libraries, reference materials, encyclopedias, and the Internet.
- ✓ Learn more about a subject than the teacher can cover in a class period.
- ✓ Develop good work habits, responsibility, and time management skills.

[1] Because we believe in the importance of individuals, we often use the singular pronoun. To be fair, we alternate the use of "him" and "her" throughout this publication.

Let Children Know the School Has High Expectations for Them

The best schools have confidence that their students *can* . . . and *will* . . . achieve. Assigning meaningful homework is one way these schools help students develop confidence in their own abilities.

Help Students Develop Self-Discipline and Learn Responsibility

Assignments give some youngsters their first chance to manage time and meet deadlines. Homework helps children learn the importance of setting goals and working to achieve them. And when they have met their deadlines and completed their homework successfully, students learn the satisfaction that comes from achieving a goal. All these skills and attitudes lead to success in school and beyond.

Bring Families and Schools Closer Together

Helping your child with homework is one way you can make a meaningful contribution to her education. Students' school performance improves when they see that their parents think education is important.

Things You Can Do To Help Your Child With Homework

Studies show that students believe they do better in school if their parents help them with homework. Here are some ways you can support your child:

Make Homework a Priority

- ✓ Let your child know that homework is his main responsibility. Many families have a "No TV until homework is done" rule.
- ✓ If your child is so involved in after-school activities that she can't complete her homework, you need to set some priorities. She might need to cut back on one or more of her commitments so she can complete her homework successfully.

✓ High school students often want after-school jobs. But studies consistently show that when students work more than 15 or 20 hours a week, their grades suffer. There is also evidence that students who work longer hours are more likely to experiment with drugs and alcohol — another reason for parents to limit work hours (*Education Week* June 3, 1998).

Show Your Interest

✓ Talk with your child about school and learning. Ask your child what he did in class that day. If he doesn't have much to say, ask a more specific question. "How do you think you did on the math test?" or "What do other students think about the novel you're reading?" Or, ask your child to read aloud a story he wrote or discuss the results of a science experiment.

✓ Set aside time for regular trips to the library. There you can check out materials for your child's homework — and some other books just for fun. Write the due date for these materials on your family calendar to avoid fines.

✓ Read to and with your child. Younger children love being read to (older kids like it, too.) As your child gets to be a better reader, you may want to read the same book and discuss it together.

✓ Another good way to show your interest is to attend school activities, such as parent-teacher meetings, music or drama performances, and sports events. If you can, volunteer to help in the classroom or at school activities. As you get to know classmates and parents, you'll also build a network of support for you and your child. (It's nice to know the phone number of someone in your child's class when she's forgotten whether the assignment is to read Chapter 10 or Chapters 10 and 11.)

Know Your Child's Teacher's Homework Policy

✓ At the start of the school year, ask your child's teacher(s) what types of homework assignments your child can expect to receive and approximately how much time should be spent on homework each evening. If your child consistently spends much more (or much less) time on homework than a teacher suggests, you'll want

to get in touch with the teacher. Perhaps the work is too difficult — or not challenging enough. In either case, the teacher can modify assignments, or suggest ways your child might study more effectively.

✓ You should also find out how each teacher wants you to be involved. Some teachers want parents to do nothing more than check that assignments are completed. Others prefer to have parents look over the homework, checking for errors.

Help Your Child Set Aside Time for Studying

✓ Of course, this doesn't always mean your child will do homework at the same time every day. If your child has after-school activities like sports, music, or a job, study time needs to be flexible. But if you find your child doing homework every night after the time she should be in bed, you may be *too* flexible!

✓ Experiment to find your child's best time for studying. Some people are "night owls" and work best in the evening. Others are "morning birds" — for them, getting up earlier to study may be best.

✓ Sometimes, kids don't (or say they don't) have homework. But it's a good idea for all students to develop a homework habit. Ask your child to spend some time each evening studying. He can always read ahead or review for an upcoming test.

Work With Your Child to Pick a Study Spot

✓ Where's the best place to study? All your child really needs is a table in a relatively quiet place, good light, and a comfortable chair. A desk in your child's bedroom is great, but the kitchen table works fine. It's helpful to keep study materials like a calculator, a dictionary and thesaurus, pens, pencils, and paper nearby. If you can't afford the supplies your child needs for school, check with a teacher, the school guidance counselor, or the principal about possible sources of assistance.

✓ If your child studies on the kitchen table, keep homework supplies in a box. It'll be easy to clean up . . . and you'll know where everything is when it's study time.

Eliminate Distractions

✓ While your child is studying, turn off the TV, don't answer the phone, and ask the whole family to keep the noise level down. Some families make study time a quiet time for everyone — parents can pay bills or do work they've brought home from the office and younger brothers and sisters can use the time for reading.

✓ Some students can learn with quiet music playing in the background, others can't. Experiment and see. But make sure your child keeps the volume down — loud music does interfere with concentration.

Help Your Child Keep Track of Each Day's Assignments

✓ One way to be involved with your child's homework is by making sure he does what's assigned. Make it a habit to check his planner or assignment notebook each day.

✓ Some schools have "homework hot lines" that allow parents to call in to check on the day's assignments. If your school does not have a telephone call-in line, perhaps you could work with other parents or the parent-teacher association to have one installed.

What To Do If Your Child's Homework Involves a Computer and You Don't Own One

These days, most schools have computers. Some school assignments require the use of a computer. What can you do if you don't have a computer in your home?

Check with the school. Some schools keep computer labs or the school library open after hours for student use. Others even loan laptop computers to students. Also, many public libraries make computers available to children.

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Check Your Child's Finished Homework

✓ When kids are in elementary school, it's usually a good idea to look over their assignments every day to make sure they are completed.

✓ Middle schoolers who have trouble finishing their assignments need parents to check them daily, too. And when your child gets

comments back from her teacher, you should look at those as well. That way, you'll have a clear picture of whether she understands the material. If your child does her homework after school before you get home from work, try to set aside a time right after dinner to look it over. This will give you some one-on-one time to talk about what else is going on in her life.

✓ By the time your child's in high school, you shouldn't need to check her homework, unless a teacher tells you there's a problem.

Help Your Child Develop a Study Plan

✓ Each day before your child starts studying, he should have a clear idea of what he needs to accomplish. Have him write down his study goals or tell them to you. Then make sure he has completed those goals before he stops studying.

✓ Usually, it's a good idea for students to start with their most difficult subject and finish up with the subject they find easiest. Some children may need to take frequent short breaks, while others lose their concentration if they stop often. By paying attention as your child studies, you can help him figure out which plan works best for him.

Teach Your Child to Ask Questions While Studying

✓ It's hard to study if you don't pay attention. Asking questions is one of the best ways to keep focused on the main point of an assignment. Some questions your child might ask himself include: "What's this paragraph about?" "What will I need to remember for class discussion tomorrow?" "Do I agree with what's being said?"

Make Sure Your Child Understands Assignments

✓ When your child starts an assignment, have her read the instructions and then tell them to you in her own words. (If your child can't read yet, the teacher may have sent home instructions for you to read.) If your child does not understand the instructions, read them with her and talk about the assignment. Are there words she doesn't understand? How can she find out what they mean? If neither you nor your child understands an assignment, call a classmate or contact the teacher.

Help Your Child With Time Management

As children get older, assignments get longer. One of the toughest skills for many students to learn is how to break longer assignments down into shorter sections so they aren't overwhelmed at the end.

✓ If your child has a long assignment, help him write a list of all the steps that will be involved in finishing it. Don't forget things like going to the store to buy the supplies for a poster or display.

Then work backwards from the due date. Help your child decide when each step needs to be completed in order to have the project finished on time. Be sure to build in time for something unexpected to happen (it usually will). Write the due dates for each step on your family calendar. As your child completes each step, he can have the satisfaction of crossing it off. You might even give him small rewards for meeting these deadlines.

Learn How Your Child Learns

People learn in different ways. Some people learn best if they can see things written down, while others need to hear information in order to remember it. Knowing your child's learning style can make study time a lot more productive. Here are some tips:

Visual learners. Does your child learn things best when she can see them? If so, she may be what educators and others call a visual learner. When a visual learner needs to memorize important facts or information, it might be helpful to make posters with the information and put them where she'll see them regularly. For example, when she is studying history, she may want to make a time line of key events and

post it on the wall. Before she writes a paper, she may want to make a web or a diagram of what she wants to say.

Auditory learners. Does your child learn better when she hears things? If so, she may be an auditory learner. To help her, you might ask if she can get school reading assignments on tape. (Many libraries have recorded books available for anyone to check out.) You can also make your own tapes. For example, for a unit on states and their capitals, you or your child could say into a tape recorder, "The capital of South Dakota" and then pause. After three or four seconds, give the answer: "Pierre." Later, your child can play the tape and review the material. This technique works well for spelling words and math facts, too.

Kinesthetic learners. Does your child learn best when she is actively involved in her work as opposed to just listening to a lecture or reading something? If so, she may be a *kinesthetic* learner. For her, memorizing facts might be easier if she writes them down several times or roleplays them. For example, she might find it easier (and probably more fun) to remember history facts and concepts by acting them out. Or, she could use household objects to recreate the solar system in your living room.

Help Your Child Visualize Success

✓ Professional athletes use this technique: They imagine themselves being successful — perhaps hitting a home run. Your child can use this method, too. Have him imagine himself calmly and confidently taking a test on the material he's studying, knowing all the answers because he studied the material thoroughly.

Emphasize the Importance of Hard Work

Students don't always see the link between effort and results. Sometimes, they think that success in school is only for "smart" kids. They need to learn that "Smart is something you *do*, not something you *are*."

✓ If your child is faced with learning a challenging subject — whether it's multiplication or algebra — let her know that she can do it if she works at it regularly. And when she is finished doing her homework for the day, reinforce the importance of hard work

by telling her that her hard work will pay off, and that if she keeps studying you know she can succeed. Share with her a time when you felt overwhelmed, but your hard work paid off.

Help Your Child Study for Tests

When your child has an important test, most of the responsibility for getting ready for it should be on his shoulders. But here are some ways you can help:

- ✓ Review with your child. In the three or four days before the test, offer to ask questions or be a "study buddy."
- ✓ Make up a practice test. If your child has a spelling test, have him practice at home. Older students should make up their own tests. By thinking about which questions the teacher is likely to ask, they'll be doing valuable reviewing.
- ✓ Let your child teach you. He'll have to master the material to teach it — and you may learn something, too!
- ✓ Help your child make a schedule to avoid cramming — it doesn't work. If your child has a big test on Friday, don't let him wait until Thursday night to start studying. He'll remember more if he studies for shorter periods each day for several days.
- ✓ Talk with your child about how to take a test. Be sure he understands how important it is to read the instructions carefully and follow them exactly. He also needs to keep track of time so he doesn't spend too much time on one question.
- ✓ Make sure your child gets a good night's sleep and a good breakfast in the morning. Even the most prepared student won't do well if he's tired or hungry.

Give Honest Praise for a Job Well Done

Think about how you feel when someone tells you you've done a good job. If the praise is sincere, chances are you feel motivated to do your best the next time. Children respond the same way. When they get praise from the people they value most — their parents — they are encouraged to keep up the good work.

✓ Of course, children also need to hear when they *haven't* done their best. In those cases, though, it's best to offer constructive criticism, suggesting what your child can do to correct the situation. So instead of telling your 3rd grader, "You aren't going to hand in that mess, are you?" try, "The teacher will understand your ideas better if you use your best handwriting." Then give praise when a neat version is completed.

Help Your Child Work Through Confusion

Sometimes, children seem confused by an assignment. Working through this situation offers a valuable lesson about the importance of persistence. When your child is confused about an assignment, you can help by asking questions such as:

✓ How do you think you need to go about finishing this assignment?

Sometimes, just talking through the steps will help your child see where she's stuck. "Oh, that's right — I forgot to reduce those fractions to the lowest common denominator."

✓ Do you understand how to do the assignment?

Sometimes, children need to learn more before they can complete an assignment. If your child was absent on the day the teacher demonstrated how to do long division, he may not be able to finish his math homework. If you understand the subject yourself, you may want to show your child how to do a problem or two. But let your child do the homework himself. That way, the teacher will have a better idea what he understands.

✓ Have you ever done any problems like the ones you're supposed to do right now?

Children may forget that they have done similar homework problems that can guide them in completing current work.

✓ Do you have everything you need to do the assignment?

Sometimes children need special supplies, such as colored pencils, metric rulers, maps, or reference books close at hand. One mother began to keep track of how her son, who was failing Spanish, did his homework. She noticed he kept his Spanish dictionary in his bedroom but did his homework in the kitchen. Because he didn't want to walk all that way to look up words he didn't understand, he was guessing answers. Keeping the dictionary close at hand helped him bring up his homework grade.

✓ Does your answer make sense to you?

If your child has multiplied 7 time 2 and gotten the answer 42, something is obviously wrong. Teach your child to do a last-minute check to see if everything seems logical.

When You No Longer Understand Your Child's Homework

It happens to all parents sooner or later: A child brings home an assignment they don't understand. But whether you do not speak English well or your child is taking some math class that's way above your head, there are still things you can do to help with homework. These include:

- ✓ *Letting your child know homework is still important, and that you're impressed by the work she's doing,*
- ✓ *Making sure your child studies every day,*
- ✓ *Asking your child to explain what he's learning,*
- ✓ *Checking to see that she has completed her homework, and*
- ✓ *Occasionally looking over graded homework to see if there are obvious problems.*

If your child has trouble in a subject and you can't help, check with the teacher. Tutoring may be available through the school. Or, perhaps another parent could help your child with one subject while you help a child with another.

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Remember Whose Homework It Is

Some parents go beyond helping — they actually *do* their child's homework. (Teachers even say they receive homework in parents' handwriting.) Doing your child's assignments won't help her understand what she's supposed to learn. It won't help her become confident in her ability to do the work. And it won't help the teacher identify her strengths and weaknesses.

What Can You Do If Your Child Is Having Problems?

Even if you follow all the steps in this booklet, your child may have difficulty with homework. If that's the case, start by talking about your concerns with your child. Ask why he thinks the problems are occurring — and then really listen to his thoughts.

You may find your child's attitude is part of the problem. At one time or another, many students have negative feelings toward classmates or teachers. Help your child see that while these feelings are normal, they are no excuse for mediocre performance. Sometimes, problems arise because students think they "aren't smart enough" to succeed. They need to know that you and their school are confident they can do well.

On the other hand, students sometimes have problems because of a situation beyond their control. For instance, classwork could be too hard — or too easy. In such cases, you may want to meet with the teacher to discuss your concern. Your child may also have a physical problem that makes learning difficult. Sometimes, a pair of glasses or a hearing aid can make a world of difference.

Your child may also have emotional problems or a learning disability that prevents him from doing his best. Your child's teacher or a school administrator can help you get the advice you need to help solve these problems.

Successful Students Become Successful Adults

Recently, researchers have studied people who are successful in school. They've found that successful students share some characteristics. They:

- ✓ motivate themselves,
- ✓ pay attention,
- ✓ understand ideas,
- ✓ remember facts and ideas, and
- ✓ work with minimal stress.

The tips in this booklet can help students develop these traits. Homework helps students reach their educational potential and teaches them skills that will help them continue to be successful throughout their lives.

Resources

Excellent new resources for parents are published every day. Here are some publications, organizations, and online resources available to help you help your child succeed in school.

Organizations

American Academy of Pediatrics has several health-related publications for parents, which can be found on the Internet at www.aap.org.

Communities in Schools, America's largest stay-in-school network, offers resources and ideas for helping America's communities help students at www.cisnet.org.

The Family Education Network offers many ideas for parent/school partnering at www.familyeducation.com.

KidsCampaigns is an information and action center for adults who want to make their communities work for children. It can be accessed online at www.connectforkids.org.

National PTA, National Standards for Parent/Family Involvement Programs. The National PTA also has a number of publications designed to help parents play a more active role in their children's education. These are available online at the PTA's Education Resource Libraries, at www.pta.org.

U. S. Department of Education has many free publications for parents on a wide range of subjects. They are available by calling 1-800-USA-LEARN or on the Internet at www.ed.gov/pubs/parents.

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Thoughts to Remember

Other books in AASA's Parents: Partners in Education Series

The following titles are also available in AASA's Parents: Partners in Education Series. This series includes updated versions of long-term best-sellers as well as several new titles, all published in 1999.

- *106 Ways Parents Can Help Students Achieve*
- *Getting Your Child Ready for School*
- **Helping Your Child Succeed in Elementary School*
- **Helping Your Child Succeed in Middle and High School*
- *Parents: Partners in Education*
- **Reading, Writing, Speaking, and Listening Skills: Keys to Your Child's School Success*

* These titles available in October 1999.

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